

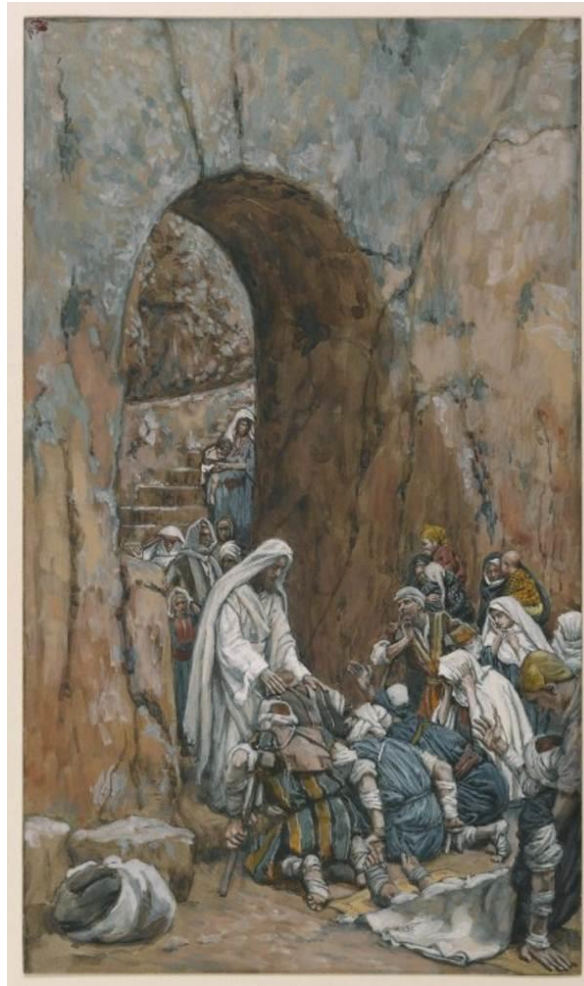


Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

Twenty Third Sunday in Ordinary Time A



Jesus heals the people...artist: James Tissot



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

Prayer for Hope

For Your mercies' sake, O Lord my God,
tell me what You are to me.
Say to my soul: "I am your salvation."
So speak that I may hear, O Lord;
my heart is listening;
open it that it may hear You,
and say to my soul: "I am your salvation."
After hearing this word,
may I come in haste to take hold of you.
Hide not Your face from me.
Let me see Your face even if I die,
lest I die with longing to see it.
The house of my soul is too small to receive You;
let it be enlarged by You.
It is all in ruins;
do You repair it.
There are things in it,
I confess and I know,
that must offend Your sight.
But who shall cleanse it?
Or to what others besides You shall I cry out?
From my secret sins cleanse me, O Lord,
and from those of others spare your servant.

--- St. Augustine

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Gospel of today begins a series for the next few of Sundays in which we focus on what it means to be a community of faithful believers.
- ▶ Christians are to embrace a new way of living, the way of love, compassion and non-violence.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

1st Reading: Ezekiel 33:7-9

- ▶ In this section of the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet warns the people of impending disaster.
- ▶ He uses the metaphor of watchman to emphasize his point.
- ▶ The watchman was stationed at the outskirts of the nation to warn the nation of advancing armies. The people rested secure because of the role of the watchman. Their security was in his hands.
- ▶ There was a firmly held belief that calamity was a result of the sin of the people and the corruption of societal values.
- ▶ Thus, Ezekiel stressed that pending invasion was the least of their problems. The people should be more concerned about the state of their souls.
- ▶ God entered into a covenant with the people. God promised to care for the needs of the people and to gratuitously love them unconditionally. The people's response for so great a gift was to be faithful to the covenant.
- ▶ The prevailing belief affirmed that when the people failed in their commitment to the covenant calamity could be expected, thus war should not be a surprise.
- ▶ Lack of faithfulness to the covenant was a far more tragic event than deportation to Babylon.
- ▶ Ezekiel took his case directly to the people rather than to the nation. He believed that the nation lost its corporate soul.
- ▶ His role as prophet compelled him to take his case to the people of Israel. Once he exhorted them to repent and return to the God of the Covenant and to assure them of God's benevolence, his job would be accomplished.
- ▶ It was up to the people to either respond or not respond.
- ▶ Ezekiel's word to the people was a less than welcomed word. The people however did not treat him too harshly as they loved the songs he sang to them.
- ▶ This reading was chosen to accompany the Gospel for the watchman metaphor.
- ▶ Believers must be watchful as they await the coming of the kingdom here and in the hereafter.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ For what do we need to be watchful today?
- ▶ In what way break the covenant God forged with us through his Son Jesus today?
- ▶ What evidence is there in your life that God unconditionally loves you and promises to care for you?
- ▶ How do you feel about the statement: “Ezekiel stressed that pending invasion was the least of their problems. The people should be more concerned about the state of their souls.” Apply that to some situation today (economy, war, etc.) What are the implications for your life and for the world?

Second Reading. Romans 13:8-10

- ▶ Paul challenged his Roman community to live up to their moral responsibilities.
- ▶ Throughout this section of Paul’s letter to the Romans he teaches the community about the Law. Paul, like Jesus, reduces the Law to one, the Law of love, love of God and love of neighbor.
- ▶ He considers the Ten Commandments an individual’s personal response to God’s gratuitous gift of love. In other words, one can do no less than live a righteous life for the great gift of God’s grace and indwelling in our lives.
- ▶ Paul’s theology would easily resonate with Jewish belief.
- ▶ Jewish rabbi’s also taught the great commandments of love.
- ▶ However, there is a difference in the Christian perspective.
- ▶ The Jewish people understood neighbor to mean “their own citizens”.
- ▶ Jesus, on the other hand, insisted that neighbor meant “everyone”. He expanded the rule of love to the entire world—Jew and gentile like.
- ▶ Paul insisted that all ethical behavior should flow as a response to the freely given love of God.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is Paul’s letter to the Roman’s a relevant word today?
- ▶ How easy or difficult is it to follow Paul’s exhortation to love our neighbor? Do we today really “love” all our neighbors, all races, people of all faiths, our adversaries in war and other conflicts? What are the implications for us today if we truly want to follow Christ and everything he taught us?
- ▶ How would you describe the love you have for God? What does your love for God compel you to do in response to the love God has for you?

Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

- ▶ The evangelists wrote the story of Christ with their own community’s needs in mind.
- ▶ Matthew was dealing with a community that was trying to cope with the influx of Gentiles in their primarily Jewish Christian community. Needless to say, it caused tension in the community. Dealing with the burden of intermingling was a challenge and stretched the limits of communal life.
- ▶ Following the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and subsequent expulsion from the synagogues, Christians were forced to create their own communal identity.
- ▶ The community set out to create an environment for Christian living based on the example and teachings of Jesus.
- ▶ Jesus begins his catechism on what it means to live in community.
- ▶ The community struggled with basic questions that dealt with very real issues such as the dilemma regarding what to do with those who fail to live the covenant, those who are unfaithful to Christ and his teaching.
- ▶ Matthew insists that Christ is present when two or more are gathered in the community.
- ▶ Matthew further insists that we can do no less than behave ethically since Christ is present in the community and for so great a gift we owe him our righteous living,

love of God and love of neighbor.

- ▶ The Jewish tradition corrected brothers and sisters who transgressed through the law of retaliation (*law of the tooth*).
- ▶ The law of retaliation was rendered useless in Christ.
- ▶ Citizens of the new kingdom were to move heaven and hearth to invite fallen-away Christians back into the community.
- ▶ Love and the spirit of forgiveness are to be the driving force when inviting people to repent.
- ▶ Censures were given when the sinner refused to accept the judgment of the community.
- ▶ It is very likely that the reference to treating the sinner like a tax collector or gentile did not come from Jesus but was a construct of the community trying to punctuate the gravity of the situation.
- ▶ Jesus hardly would have spoken in such a derogatory way about gentiles and tax collectors since his ministry constantly reached out to them.
- ▶ In the sixteenth chapter of Matthew Peter was given the power to forgive sins, to bind and loose sins.
- ▶ Today's Gospel extends that power to the Church thus affording the means by which sinners are reconciled.
- ▶ The Gospel also points to the necessity of prayer. Prayer reconciles and brings peace and harmony to the entire community.
- ▶ Jesus gathers the faithful. Jesus is present in the community and they are gathered under the canopy of his cross and resurrection.
- ▶ Believers can do no less than live the moral life and commit themselves to repentance and reconciliation as well as to living the great law of love.
- ▶ Conflict was common in antiquity. Communities found ways to diffuse conflict before it turned to violence.
- ▶ Those who had conflicts simply ranted and raved at one another just as Jesus did in his anger toward Bethsaida, Chorazin and Capernaum.
- ▶ Jesus however trusted God to judge those cities and thus took no action against them.
- ▶ Loud ranting and ravings seemed to diffuse situations before they got out of hand.
- ▶ Today's pericope highlights how to resolve conflict in the community.
- ▶ Such conflict resolution is proscribed for Christians against other Christians. It is intended to govern conflicted relationships in the community, not out in the world with non-Christians.
- ▶ Sin is the underlying reason for conflict. Conflict was understood as a result of sin between people.
- ▶ When someone brought shame to another person in the intensely shame and honor based culture of the ancient world it was considered a very serious offense--thus, the requisite necessity to adjudicate such offenses.
- ▶ Today's Gospel illustrates a three-step method for dealing with conflict.
 - 1. *Confrontation*. The offended party was to confront the one who brought him shame and dishonor. If there was no intention to bring shame on the part of the offender then both parties were expected to work things

- out amicably, in private, thus saving face.
- 2. *Negotiation*. If and when such confrontation did not reach a desirable outcome, the offended party was to bring two or three witnesses to help settle the conflict.
 - This was a semi-private, legal undertaking requiring at least two witnesses.
 - The Greek word for “anything” found in verse nineteen means “legal case, litigation.”
 - All parties were aware of the seriousness of their deliberations.
 - To bring false witness against another person was a serious matter and thus was to be avoided at all costs.
 - The decision of the witnesses was binding.
 - This negotiating step of the process was intended to restore the honor of all parties involved, thus hoping to avoid the last step.
 - 3. *Adjudication*. Herein lies the public solution. If all attempts to negotiate the resolution failed, the situation then was brought before the entire community.
 - All transgressions that dishonored the offended party were brought before the community for adjudication.
 - The community judged the conflict in a very public way.
 - If the offended party refused to accept the decision of the community he was expelled from the community and thus considered an outcast (much like tax collector and gentiles).
 - When a person was excommunicated it was a very grave matter. They no longer shared the security of home, family and protection of the community. It was paramount to a death sentence.
 - Jesus was considered the chief adjudicator in such matters due to the belief in his presence in the community. Jesus extended his authority to the Church to judge as he would judge in such matters. That authority continues today.
 - God affirms the properly discerned decisions of the community.
 - The bottom line? There should be no need for such adjudication. There is no place in the community for such shameful behavior.
 - Today’s gospel reminds all of us of the seriousness of our relationships.
 - It is also a call to disciples in the Church today to examine situations with a prayerful, open and discerning heart before jumping to conclusions.
 - It is an adult call to responsible, discerning discipleship.
 - We are all called to be accountable to God.
 - We are thus challenged to consider the policies and structures in our world today that do not uphold the honor and dignity of all of God’s people.
 - Perhaps this Gospel is an invitation to consider the way in which illegal immigrants are judged today and how they are all painted with the same brush.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix for an example.

- ▶ In what way is this a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ What are the major themes in this Gospel?
- ▶ What is Jesus teaching his disciples about how to deal with conflict?
- ▶ How do you deal with conflict?
- ▶ In what way does your manner of dealing with conflict resonate with Jesus' teaching? How might you handle conflict differently as a result of this Gospel?
- ▶ How does what Jesus' was teaching us in today's Gospel have anything to do with your life today?
- ▶ What might the world glean from the model Jesus sets forth in this Gospel?

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

► How do you deal with conflict?

When I was younger I avoided conflict at all costs. I was raised to believe that a person should defer to others no matter the issue. It was the model I observed throughout my formative years.

As I grew in faith and owned my own dignity as a child of God, I realized that avoiding conflict was certainly not God's will and I worked very hard to change my behavior. In earlier years when I believed I had been wronged, I obsessed about the words I would have used if I had the courage to confront. Such obsessing was a waste of time and energy.

Christ shows us the Christian way to deal with conflict. As I grew in wisdom through the years I stepped out in faith to address what I should address. This calls to mind a very ordinary situation in which a person snapped at me for some perceived transgression she thought I committed. My first reaction was flight—ignore and retreat. My second reaction was anger. While there are some situations in which we should simply not take offense and move on, there are other times when we must address situations if we hope to maintain healthy relationships.

I took a deep breath and approached the woman; I explained the situation. She apologized for jumping to conclusions and together we reconciled and made peace. No one's self esteem was injured and we handled the situation in the spirit of today's Gospel.

Christ shows us the way if we would remember to take heed and simply (or not so simply) follow it.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Church and Ecclesiology
Morality
Moral Decision Making
Sacrament of Reconciliation

Prayer
Sin
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

CHURCH ECCLESIOLOGY

The eighteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel has been referred to as the "Discourse on the Church". Matthew records Jesus' teaching that directly refers to ecclesial issues. Today's Gospel is the second section of the discourse. In the first section Jesus addressed who will be first in the kingdom, the issue of scandal and the behavior the shepherd is to display toward the sheep. Today's sequence is a reminder to all the gathered faithful that we are gathered into one community of reconciled believers. The liturgy is a commentary on what it means to be a disciple of the Lord. The old way of violence, hatred and conflict is not the way of Christians. There is a Christian approach to conflict resolution between Christians. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY.

MORALITY

This section of Matthew's gospel includes the major portion of Jesus' teaching regarding community life. We are dealing with a community struggling to respond to deal with life in community. They answer questions such as: "What do we do when one of our member fails in their responsibility as a disciple of Christ"? The authority structures of Judaism no longer worked for the new Christian church. Matthew tried to fashion the moral and communal life of the community based on the teachings of Jesus. This is the heart of Matthew's ecclesiology: because Jesus is present in the church, the church is driven to act morally. This motivates the community's response to God and one another. It is thus important to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about Christian MORALITY.

MORAL DECISION MAKING

This section of Matthew's gospel includes the major portion of Jesus' teaching regarding community life. We are dealing with a community struggling to respond to deal with life in community. They answer questions such as: "What do we do when one of our member fails in their responsibility as a disciple of Christ"? The authority structures of Judaism no longer worked for the new Christian church. Matthew tried to fashion the moral and communal life of the community based on the teachings of Jesus. This is the heart of Matthew's ecclesiology: because Jesus is present in the church, the church is driven to act morally. This motivates the community's response to God and one another. It is thus important to focus our attention on what it means to base our moral decisions on our discipleship and on Christian teaching. Today's doctrinal session will focus on what the Church teaches about MORAL DECISION MAKING.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

In today's gospel, Matthew lays out the plan for correction of the brothers and sisters of God's family. It behooves the community to bring those who stray back into the fold. Those who have "missed the mark" are to be reconciled to the community. The process of reconciliation described in this gospel was to be driven by a spirit of forgiveness. Jesus' own reconciliation continues in the sacramental life of the Church—the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on the SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION.

PRAYER

Matthew reminds his readers that prayer is the unifying force that will reconcile the community. They are gathered together because of Christ. They are church because of Jesus Christ crucified. Christ is present in their midst. They can do no less than behave in love and reconciliation toward one another. The habit and consistency of prayer strengthens the community to offer Christ's reconciling love to brothers and sisters in a spirit of mutual love and forgiveness. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention today on what the Church teaches about PRAYER.

SIN

Conflict in first century Palestine was understood as a result of sin between people. The ancient world was a shame/honor-based culture. To bring shame to someone was a grave offense. Today's definition of sin is to fail to show love to God and to one another. Ezekiel insisted that sin was to blame for the war at Israel's door. Sin has always been understood as a rupture in humanity's relationship with God. When we fail in our relationships we sin. Today's Gospel is a catechism on conflict resolution as demonstrated by the first Christian community. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about SIN.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.